



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
INFORMATION SERVICE

office files
1/11/55

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release JANUARY 10, 1955

DECREASE OF WHOOPING CRANES WORRIES CONSERVATIONISTS

A final fall-winter count of whooping cranes at their winter refuge in Texas shows that the sole surviving flock of America's rarest migratory birds has declined to 21, three short of the previous year, the Fish and Wildlife Service reported today.

Reports from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge state that no offspring arrived at the Federal sanctuary with the flock when it moved down from its breeding grounds in the far north. This is the first time since population records of the giant, resonant voiced birds have been kept that the cranes have come to their Texas wintering grounds without at least two young birds.

Since establishment of the Aransas Refuge in 1937, the annual fall-winter censuses have shown an average of four fledglings each season.

Despite Federal efforts to save the unique cranes from extinction, natural losses and the gunfire of careless or malicious hunters have held down the growth of the flock. The first official count of whooping cranes in 1938-39 accounted for 18 birds. In 1941-42 the flock reached a low point of 15. The wintering population then rose gradually to 34 in 1949-50 but declined again to 21 in 1952-53. The 1953 autumn count of 24, which included three offspring, revived hope for the species' survival which now again seems to be an uphill battle.

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